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NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY EX-ATTACHE, OLIVIA HOWARD DUNBAR AND RICHARD
LE GALLIENNE.

A NOVEL OF BRITTANY.*

No more comprehensive illustration of the rôle played by the Paris priest in the rural districts of France has ever been given to the public than that contained in "Gray Mist," the second novel of that writer who, by reason of her devotion to the memory of Elizabeth of Austria, prefers to be known in literature as the author of "The Martyrdom of an Empress."

"Gray Mist" shows us the extent to which the whole life of the little community centres around the rectory. It is thither that the peasant and the fisherman turn their steps for advice and help in every perplexity and every difficulty. They have no secrets from their Curé. Often he has known them from childhood, and has endowed them with whatever education they possess. He has christened, confirmed and married them, he has buried their dear ones, and possesses the most intimate acquaintance with all their domestic affairs, their material interests, their shortcomings, their virtues, their aspirations and fears. He is their chosen guide, and deservedly enjoying their whole-hearted confidence, wields over them an extraordinary influence. Nowhere is this of more advantage to the government than in the ancient Duchy of Brittany, where the population—entirely distinct from that of the remainder of France—is characterized by all the violence of passion, and the fervency of religious belief, peculiar to the Celtic race.

Abbé Kornog is not the hero of the book. But he is undoubtedly its most lovable character, and throughout its pages

* "Gray Mist." By the author of "The Martyrdom of an Empress." New York and London: Harper & Brothers.

he plays a predominant and yet always sympathetic rôle. A reviewer whose knowledge of French conditions and literature is unrivalled in America, has pronounced him "one of the finest creations ever found in fiction." Indeed, the Abbé Kornog is even far more attractive than Ludovic Halévy's Abbé Constantin. For whereas the latter is a bland and gentle old man, who conveys a greater idea of saintliness than of strength, and whose lines, thanks to his rich American parishioners, are cast in pleasant places, the Curé of Kermarioker is a forceful and intensely human nature, the keystone of a poverty-stricken community, composed exclusively of peasants and fisherfolk, whose hardships he shares, and whom, in spite of their suspicious, reserved and rebellious character, he dominates not alone by his sacred office, and by his brain, but also by his brawn. As an illustration of this we are told how he thrashed, and hurled head first on to a manure-heap, the village bully, a burly innkeeper, when the latter, rendered almost insane with rage by the Abbé's action in wrenching a bottle of vile potato brandy from a peasant and breaking it on the ground, had so far forgotten himself as to menace the priest with personal violence. It was during a terrible cholera epidemic at Kermarioker, and the worthy Father was on his way home after a night sad and weary spent ministering as a priest and as a physician to his dying friend Herve Rouzik, whose soul had taken its flight for a better world just as day was breaking. His heart was very heavy. For he had known Rouzik, the foster-father of the hero of the book, from childhood. But when he saw a member of his flock buying potato brandy, the sale of which he had forbidden while the cholera was raging, his anger got the better of his grief, and he then and there used his brawn to enforce the orders which he had issued, not only as Curé, but also in his capacity as a health officer. For at Kermarioker, as in many another remote fishing-village on the rocky, wreck-strewn coast of Brittany, there was no doctor within reach.

"Not for miles and miles, and from the first minute when the scourge appeared, the Curé 'took hold'—as the sailors say—and governed the sick and the well alike, as no other could have done—almost with a rod of iron."

And thus it is in well-nigh every village of that strange, primitive part of France known as Brittany, whenever visited by cholera

or any other deadly epidemic. The Curé, besides administering the last rites to the dying, acts as physician and as nurse to the sick, converting his rectory into a free dispensary. Thanks to his influence as a Minister of the Church, he is able to exercise an authority in all sanitary matters of the village that no lay health officer could ever hope to wield. He brings consolation to the bereaved, acts as executor of the last wishes of the dead, is *de facto* guardian of the widows and young orphans, secures obedience to the laws of the land from a people impatient of secular authority, and in one word is a very human and therefore sympathetic representative of that Providence to Whom all turn in times of stress and trouble—especially in Brittany. The Curé usually becomes so attached to his flock, that frequently, as in the case of Abbé Kornog, he declines preferment, in order to remain with those among whom he has labored so devotedly, and with such unselfishness. For most of the meagre stipend of 800 francs (\$150) a year which the Breton Curés received until a few months ago from the state, went in charity, their parishioners being as a rule too poverty-stricken to contribute anything save an occasional catch of fish, or a basket of vegetables, to the maintenance of their rector.

What they will do without him now it is difficult to say. Yet without stipend from the state, or from his parish, without even church or rectory, how can he remain, unless financial assistance comes from devout Catholics in other and less impoverished parts of France? Not only will the people suffer cruelly from the loss of the one mentor and friend to whom alone they accord their whole trust, and from whom they have derived so much moral and material support; but the Government also will be subjected to no end of difficulty through the disappearance of their most useful agents for the maintenance of order. When the Curé departs, the restraining influence goes, and trouble is almost certain to result, in this strange and romantic region, where less than a third of the population understand and speak French, in fact, only those of the lower classes who have served in the army, and especially in the navy. For Brittany is the latter's nursery, and furnishes far and away the largest proportion of its sailors, the backbone indeed of the French fleet.

Quite appropriately it is the ocean that brings upon the scene Pierrek, whose brief career forms the subject of the drama. He

emerges from a bank of gray mist, a little child floating upon the surface of the sea, and so startling and unexpected is the apparition, that the terror-stricken crew of the fishing-boat "Stere-den-ab-Vor" precipitately cross themselves, regarding it as the dreaded "Kollidik Apouliek," that is to say, a spectral still-born baby, abandoned by God to Satan, who tosses it for sport far out to sea, to serve as a harbinger of doom to seafaring men. The skipper, however, is of sterner mould, and observing that the child is very much alive, sheers alongside, takes it on board, and adopts it in the place of his own little boy, whose death some time previously had wrecked the mind of his young wife. When he returns to land with the little waif, she sees therein the restoration of her own baby by the sea. And so great is her joy at the recovery of her child, that her reason is restored thereby. The village, moved by compassion, humors her, and even the good Curé has not the heart to undeceive her. This pathetic deception, this pious fraud, constitutes the foundation of the story. Every link of the latter has been welded so deftly into an unbroken chain of apparently logical consequences, that the reader, though impressed with a sense of impending disaster, proceeds as unsuspecting of the terrible dénouement as are the victims thereof themselves, until the final and crushing blow of destiny from a wholly unexpected quarter. The nature of the blow is in itself repellent. Yet it is handled with so much delicacy, so much reticence and so much pathos, that it gradually appears to the cultured reader as the inevitable climax of the story, and that any other would have been unnatural and incongruous.

A remarkable feature of this weird and powerful story, which, unlike most of the novels of the present day, leaves an indelible impression upon the mind, is a degree of restraint, rare in a woman, observed by the author. So much is left to the imagination, so much has been avoided that would have tempted a less gifted writer to intensify the action and to paint it in more lurid colors. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the final pages of the book. Pierrek, when the crisis is reached, does not do murder, nor take his own life—suicide is well-nigh unknown in Catholic Brittany. He enlists for naval service on the fever-stricken rivers and coasts of Cochin-China, and perched in the crosstrees of the cruiser bound for the Orient, vanishes from the gaze of the reader into that Gray Mist from which he

emerged as a baby at the outset of the story—that gray mist so pregnant with poetry and romance, and which the graceful verses which head each chapter of the book so happily describe as “God’s veil of mystery.”

EX-ATTACHE.

“LAFCADIO HEARN.”*

THERE could scarcely be found a figure of Lafcadio Hearn’s distinction and literary allurements who should be at the same time as well calculated to baffle a biographer. He lived always an alien among aliens. There is little obvious relation between the different periods of his lonely life. He formed strong attachments which in almost every case his curious sensitiveness led him to shatter. A nature to whom self-revelation was not only uncongenial but impossible, he must have preserved an almost complete spiritual isolation. To reconstruct such a life and personality as this is the business of a seer. And it is a task that Mrs. Wetmore has cautiously—avoided.

With less scrupulousness, the biographer might have allowed her imagination to fuse together the fragments at hand and presented a complete hypothetical picture. With less discretion, she might have admitted, as is intimated in the preface, trivial facts which would have made Hearn seem more human without making him seem more admirable. Hampered, therefore, by her virtues, the virtues of friendship, she has done little more than present an outline of her subject’s life. Of the thousand pages that the two large volumes contain, only 160 are given to the “Life.” Therefore the work might have been more appropriately called the “Letters,” merely, of Lafcadio Hearn. It is in these that the significance of the publication mainly consists, and it is among them that the reader must look to satisfy that curiosity as to the man’s inner image that an artist’s work legitimately arouses. Mrs. Wetmore herself says that the abundance of the epistolary material has obliged her to “abandon all temptation to dwell upon his more human side, his humor, tenderness, sympathy, eccentricity and the thousand queer, charming qualities that made up his many-faceted nature.” That one has omitted, merely for lack of space, all that distinguishes a biography from an encyclopædic summary will perhaps be considered an extraordinary

* “The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn.” 2 volumes. By Elizabeth Bisland. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.